

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

September 20th, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

With the progressive liberation of the countries of Europe the task of rebuilding a devastated continent is already upon us before the first stage of winning the war is completed. To reap the fruits of victory is certainly not going to be any easier than to achieve it. What has happened since D Day has proved that, given an end powerful enough to evoke them, capacities to plan, organize, execute and co-operate are present in the United Nations in a higher degree and wider extent than any of us had supposed. The momentous question is how far this splendid fund of energy and ability can be drawn upon for the tasks that lie beyond the war.

IDEALS AND REALITIES

On the threshold of these tasks Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr utters a warning which we would do well to heed. In an incisive editorial note in the summer number of *Christianity and Society*,¹ he calls attention to the chasm which exists between our ideal aims and what is actually happening. The succession of pronouncements by the Churches about the foundations of peace-making leave on the mind an impression of unreality. They interpret rightly the moral requirements of an international community and reflect truly the moral aspirations of the peoples. But if one talks with those whose business it is to observe the actual course of events, one is left with a feeling that the ideals do not for some reason engage the realities. Consciously the nations are aiming at world order, but unconsciously each nation seeks advantage for itself. The actual drift is towards spheres of influence and national self-reliance. Each of the leading nations is concerned primarily about its own security, and the danger is that in the pursuit of this an effective system of collective security will go by the board.

Part of the reason for the divorce between ideals and realities is that war compels many decisions to be taken in secret, so that they are withdrawn from democratic discussion and control. These decisions are dictated by military necessity, but they carry a full weight of political implications. They establish trends which will not be easily reversed. In economic questions also far-reaching decisions are being taken behind the scenes, the inevitable, though perhaps at the time unforeseen, consequences of which may seriously restrict the choices that are possible in decisions to be taken in the future. In these circumstances, Dr. Niebuhr suggests, those who spend their strength in enun-

¹ Obtainable from the Rev. Ronald Preston, Annandale, North End Road, London, N.W. 11. Annual subscription, 4s.

ciating moral ideals are rather like children who, having been allowed by their fathers to lay their hands on the reins, are under the illusion that they are driving the horse. "In the present situation a few statesmen are holding the reins, while a lot of small boys are futilely playing as if they were driving."

But the divorce between our ideals and the actual, he goes on to point out, has a still deeper cause. This is the contradiction, inherent in human life, between our conscious purposes and our real desires; in St. Paul's language, between the law in our minds and the law in our members. This contradiction in our nature can never be completely overcome. But it could be overcome to a greater degree politically if it were more fully understood religiously.

If Christians had a deeper understanding of their own religion they would see that the primary thing is not to keep on insisting that nations ought to obey the moral law. To do that is to concentrate attention on the sins of the Nazis, who have denied that there is such a law. It is far more important for the future that we should be alive to the sins to which we are ourselves prone. The temptation to which the democratic nations are in danger of succumbing is that of outwardly acknowledging the moral law and denying it in practice. The primary concern of the Church ought to be to make the peoples who are the champions of righteousness aware of "their secret treason toward their own ideals." Otherwise "the idealists of the democratic world will continue to save the world by elaborating perfect international ideals, while the impulses of the nations all drive the world in the opposite direction."

Dr. Niebuhr's remark that, if we had a deeper religious understanding of the unceasing conflict between our conscious aims and our hidden desires we should be better able to deal with our political problems, deserves to be carefully pondered. It points to the true way in which the Christian faith can exercise an influence on the international situation.

We shall consider in future News-Letters some of the major questions of international politics and the preservation of peace. But I do not believe any particular set of proposals can justly claim to provide a more Christian solution than some other. Right political decisions depend on accurate knowledge of innumerable facts and forces and on a correct estimate of the weight to be attached to each. They also involve moral choices, and it is the duty of Christians to see where these lie and to bring them into the open. But in all large questions the moral considerations are rarely all on one side, nor do they necessarily combine in favour of one course of action. To isolate one single factor in a complex situation and demand that it should be decisive in determining policy as a whole may make a right solution of the total problem impossible and, as a consequence, produce evils greater than those it was hoped to avert.

We are in a quite different region when those who have to deal responsibly with international affairs—as statesmen, civil servants, members of Parliament, journalists or citizens—bring to their appraisal of the facts convictions and experiences that belong to another level

of their being. Their judgments, while losing nothing of their objectivity, then become suffused by an influence by which they are subtly, perhaps imperceptibly but it may be crucially, changed. They acquire a new quality of *depth*, and at this deeper level solutions may present themselves that would never have been discovered on a more superficial view.

There is no reason why an undistorted view of realities should lead to cynicism or despair. To recognize the strength of egoistic impulses is to be free from self-deception and, therefore, better equipped to deal with the situation. As was pointed out in the Supplement on "Christianity and Power" (C.N.-L. No. 212), there is no law and no justice, within the nation or between the nations, that is not at the same time the expression in some measure of the interest of some group. No ideal can attain to power in the political sphere without entering into an alliance with some vital interest. As Dr. Niebuhr rightly says, "a world community cannot be established if nations do not recognize some law beyond their interest. But neither will it be established if statesmanship does not find some point of concurrence between self-interest or national interest and the general welfare, which is, in this case, the peace of the world community."

AN EXPERIMENT IN TRAINING THE CHRISTIAN LAITY

Nothing need be said to emphasize the importance of the matter to which the following letter directs attention. The making of a more Christian society must be in the main the work of Christian lay men and women, and plainly their contribution will in many instances be more effective if the right kind of training can be provided for those willing to take advantage of it. A good deal more about the subject will, I hope, find a place in the Christian News-Letter in the coming weeks and months. In the meantime this letter will serve to put it on the map.

"I have been feeling for some time that the influence of the Churches on post-war English life will turn largely on the quality of lay activity. The field is so tremendous that the clergy by their very numbers alone cannot be expected to cover more than a small part of it, and obviously into the greater proportion of our working life the layman alone enters. If, however, the layman is to exert anything like a telling influence, mere vague goodwill cannot be adequate. He must be as much a trained man as he can be made. When I heard, therefore, the other day of a movement in the Royal Air Force to make such training possible, I felt it was an experiment so clearly important that you might be willing to take notice of it in the C.N.-L. I have not thus far had the opportunity of seeing what Anglicans and Free Churchmen have been doing, but I was this last week able, by great goodwill, to see something of a Roman Catholic training course.

"This was one of eight courses that were being held simultaneously in various parts of the country, and already, I learnt, roughly 2,000 Roman Catholic members of the R.A.F. had been put under this training. I found sixty or so airmen and women staying in a convent house on the western outskirts of London. They were all members of the Guild of the Sword of the Spirit, chosen from their stations because they had

shown some capacity for Catholic leadership, and allowed by the Air Force authorities to go to this training in the course of their official duty.

"The course lasted roughly for a week, and in that time they were worked extremely hard. Two lectures were given during the forenoon, a third in the afternoon, and after tea they settled down to discussion in chosen groups. The quality of lecturing was high and, under the direction of a Royal Air Force chaplain, was given mostly by clergy who were not Service chaplains, a significant fact in itself in so far as it was strengthening the links between the serving man and the home Church. These lectures ranged from the teaching of doctrine to its application to the pressing questions of the day, and were related to the background of the Air Force life.

"It was not merely, however, a case of instruction. Those who attended the course were left in no doubt at all that their training must invariably lead up to action. They were taught the 'see, judge, act' method of the Jocists—first to begin each meeting of their station leaders group with the 'Gospel enquiry.' In that they were shown how to take some incident or piece of teaching from the Gospels, see how our Lord behaved, and how others might react towards Him, judge as He did, and aim to act finally as He acted. That done they were taught to go on to make the 'Social enquiry'—to see first what the people around them thought about it, then to make their Christian judgment upon it, and finally to resolve on definite action. Both these enquiries, they were taught, should be prepared by the members of the group during the previous week, and should be followed by careful scrutiny at the next meeting of what action had in fact been taken.

"All this struck me as important. The layman was being properly trained to take his full part. He was not merely being told to act. He was being shown a way. He was being put in a position to discover for himself fresh criteria for Christian activity, and the fact that the method of training used was that also used by the Young Catholic Workers, meant that common ground was being made between those who were serving and those who have stayed, a result surely of great promise for the years of peace that lie ahead of us."

THE SUPPLEMENT

Miss Violet Markham, C.H., is deputy chairman of the Assistance Board and chairman of the Inquiry on the Welfare and Amenities in the Women's Services. She has had considerable experience for many years in the affairs of both local and central government. She was Mayor of Chesterfield, her native town, in 1927.

Yours sincerely,

D. H. Deane

OLD AGE PENSIONERS

By VIOLET R. MARKHAM

The first observation I have to make about Old Age Pensioners is the danger of generalizing about them. Old Age Pensioners, like the unemployed, are not a class apart, but a cross section of the population. Both classes present considerable problems, but the problems must be broken up and each dealt with separately. There is no standard type of Old Age Pensioner. Some are hale, hearty and happy; some are decrepit, sickly and sad. Some form part of a family household; others live alone—some in comfort, some in squalor. Some are morose and friendless; others are the life and soul of their street. They have only one feature in common—all alike are getting older, and whatever problems they present in the way of health necessarily become cumulative.

What are the reactions of these old people on the community?

To-day there are nearly 4,000,000 Old Age Pensioners, of whom about 1,500,000 are Supplementary Pensioners in receipt of allowances administered by the Assistance Board. They constitute an important block of the electorate of considerable interest to politicians. This large and diverse class present some serious economic, as well as personal, problems. With a population at once ageing and shrinking, can we afford pensions on an age basis without regard to earning capacity? There is no wealth but work, and the higher standard of life at which we are aiming implies hard work on the part of the whole community. Granted a reasonable economic system, to withdraw workers who have not lost their industrial skill from the labour market on reaching an automatic clock age is harmful both to the nation and the individual. This is the nettle which Sir William Beveridge grasped in his argument (para. 244 et seq.) about retirement pensions. "The pensions proposed in the Plan for Social Security are retirement pensions, not old age pensions. There is no fixed age for retirement, but only a minimum pension age, 65 for men and 60 for women, at and after which each individual has the option of retiring and claiming pension. . . . To attempt to force people to retire before their powers and desire for work fail, and to compel them by a rise in the minimum age of pensions to struggle on after their powers have failed are two errors and injustices which should be avoided by any system of social insurance designed to increase human happiness."

This important section of the Beveridge Report raises a vital issue of policy for the younger age group of Pensioners who are physically robust and still capable of playing some part in industry. And assuming—perhaps a large assumption—that we can contrive an economy of plenty, the issue is no less important to a nation which cannot afford any loss of productive capacity.

Personal considerations reinforce the economic argument. Many men and women who have led an active life in industry suffer keenly when relegated to the shelf. Citizenship for vast numbers of people expresses itself in work. Take work away and the individual concerned

feels tossed on to the national scrap-heap. The sense of uselessness bites very deep. Leisure is valuable to men and women on the higher reaches of education, but it means little or nothing to those whose lives and interests are built round their daily work. The day of retirement inevitably dawns sooner or later; but is it necessary to hasten it unduly for those still capable anyway of part-time work? Loneliness is the great enemy of old age, and it becomes cumulative for those who have no families and no work and lead a solitary existence.

Turning to the section of Pensioners who are no longer capable of regular employment, we find no one type, but a diversity of creatures. Considerable public and political interest is shown in these old people. An Old Age Pensioners' Association with a substantial membership keeps a sharp eye on both the Parliamentary and local positions. The general public feels a good deal of sympathy for an aged man or woman alone in the world or for an aged couple, and many efforts are made by charitable persons and societies to cheer and brighten their lot. Excellent clubs have been organized in some localities, which provide not only companionship and recreation, but keep Pensioners in touch with current affairs and help to preserve the sense of citizenship. But again I repeat, these old people must be dealt with not by categories, but as individuals. What suits one does not suit another, and when proffering help and sympathy it is necessary to move with caution and experience as well as with goodwill.

Four questions arise constantly in dealing with Pensioners—the question of health, the question of accommodation, the question of domestic help, the question of friendly visiting. And all four are inextricably mixed. The Assistance Board has responsibilities for the welfare of Supplementary Pensioners. Welfare is a vague, rather unsatisfactory, term which covers both physical and psychological needs, but the two needs do not necessarily coincide and give rise to many perplexities. Some voices in Parliament are loud in their demands for welfare work, others are no less loud in the demand that Pensioners should be let alone and that there should be no interference in their private lives. Both points of view are justifiable. I have already referred to the constant problem among Old Age Pensioners of an ever deteriorating physical condition. A conscientious and humane officer who becomes aware that a solitary client of the Board is deteriorating in health is placed in a difficult position if the said client stubbornly refuses to see either the parish doctor or to avail himself of institutional treatment under the Public Authority. Among the older men and women there is often—though not always—deep reluctance to use these facilities—"the Poor Law has left a scar not yet healed," said one competent observer. Some of these old people turn into solitary eccentrics. Not only sympathetic, but experienced visiting is essential in these circumstances. The friendly amateur with the best intentions might easily rouse a whirlwind of resentment. On the other hand, the value of trained voluntary help as auxiliary to the official machine is increasingly recognized in all social work. Real service can be rendered to old persons by a wise visitor who appreciates the psychological set-up and is prepared to devote time and thought to the personal aspects of a case.

No less important is the provision of suitable accommodation. Here a wide field of usefulness opens out for charitable effort. Health and housing as they concern the aged call for closer study than they have yet received. Voluntary effort, unlike the State, can experiment at will. It can make mistakes, profit by them and start afresh without involving Government departments in difficulties or raising awkward questions in Parliament. It is no longer necessary for philanthropic bodies to pay small sums of money to old people to keep body and soul together. The responsibility of the State for the payment of adequate subsistence allowances is now universally recognized. But there is real and increasing need for the provision of the right sort of dwelling place, properly sited and within reach of nursing and medical help. In this direction voluntary effort, collaborating with the state machine, can render valuable service to the community. This aspect of the housing problem raises some delicate and, at times, contradictory factors. The desire to keep yourself to yourself is often potent with the old. Yet life may be lonely and growing physical incapacity may call not only for neighbourly kindness, but definite medical oversight from nurse or doctor. Segregation of any class of persons is undesirable; yet old people ideally should live not far removed from a shopping centre and where Church and club facilities and other little amenities of life are obtainable without too great a tax on physical strength. Oversight of health, yet without fuss or interference, is very necessary for those whose bodily condition is deteriorating. When a certain point of feebleness is reached or senile decay has set in, institutional care of the aged can scarcely be avoided, difficult though it may be to induce the old person to take this step. I have already referred to the reluctance of Pensioners to enter state institutions, though among the mixed bag of the Public Authorities there are examples of admirable homes conducted on enlightened and humane lines. At present the pension has to be surrendered on entering an institution, a demand greatly resented by the pensioners. This administrative demand, carrying with it a trail of the old Poor Law disqualification, is I think a mistake and unduly prejudices the often good work of the Public Authorities. If the old person were allowed to keep the pension and pay his or her board from it, the sense of independence would be maintained and a definite wound to pride avoided.

Various societies provide homes and some medical care for old people. There is much to be said for the principle of the mediaeval almshouse adapted to twentieth-century ideas. It combines community life with personal independence and the privacy to which many people rightly cling. As a community the almshouse is not too segregated to be cut off from the wider interests of the neighbourhood. On the other hand, it is sufficiently grouped together to make available the daily provision of some organized domestic help which, like medical help, should be at hand for those who need it. A sick bay forming part of the housing group can deal with chronic disability not requiring skilled medical attention. A living-room furnished with personal effects and containing the little treasures and valued "bits" of a life-time preserves the sense of home and takes away any harsh institutional flavour. Collaboration along these lines between societies providing houses and

personal care and the State providing allowances spells comfort and happiness for the declining years. And the personal relations which individual visitors have time to build up as distinct from the necessary brief appearance of an official are often of great assistance to the latter in inducing a client of the Assistance Board to make such changes in their way of life as circumstances compel. A semi-institutionalized existence solves many difficulties of a lonely and delicate old age. Though, of course, there will always be solitary souls who refuse to join in such a life and prefer to live and die alone. There is another aspect of the housing question about which I should lack candour if I passed it over in silence. Difficulties may and do arise when a Pensioner is not solitary, but lives as a member of a household. His or her constant presence, sometimes an irritable or ailing presence, is not always conducive to harmony in family life. It may imply pressure both on accommodation and morale. The burthens which the ever-growing longevity of the old tends to rivet more and more firmly on the shoulders of the young is a serious aspect of an ageing population. The claims made upon younger members—the obstacles presented either to marriage or a career—are not negligible factors in our social system. Self-sacrificing devotion and burthens cheerfully carried are Christian virtues always to be commended; and yet it is impossible not to recognize that such sacrifices indefinitely made and accepted may lead to broken lives among the younger generation. There is profound truth in R. L. Stevenson's words that "we see more to lament for in a life cut off in the midst of usefulness and love than in one that miserably survives all love and usefulness and goes about the world the phantom of itself."

For this difficult question as for many others concerned with Old Age Pensioners there is no absolute or universal answer. The values of sacrifice are too precious in a community striving, however imperfectly, to fulfil a Christian ethic to be challenged lightly in such an age as ours. We do not regard as admirable a family which repudiates all obligations to its elders; but sacrifice could and should be a two-way effort in the relations of old and young. Integration of difficulties may take place on a high plane if each side strives for the blessing which rests on the giver, and horizons, personal and domestic, are not darkened by the shadow of self. The problem is a real one and it is bound to grow. Both individuals and society as a whole must give thought to its solution.

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